

Editorial: Drilling, mining, grazing

Interior Secretary Norton favored them all

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Most of the nation's Department of Interior secretaries have tried to give national interests precedence in decisions affecting public lands.

Not Gale Norton. The nation's 48th interior secretary had this view of public lands management: Local interests should take precedence over the national interest. As she leaves office Friday, that will be her legacy.

"We started out with the idea of cooperative conservation and that the federal government could work best as partners with local citizens," Norton said in a parting interview with the Associated Press.

In keeping with that philosophy, as one of her last acts, she signed an order that could open roads across public lands to right-of-way claims by state and county governments - without public or congressional debate.

But it's not simply local interests that held sway in the 2001-2006 Norton era, but particular local interests: drilling, mining and grazing. During her tenure, she opened public lands to new development and embraced rules that made it more difficult for the general public to have a say in issues involving federal lands.

During her tenure, Norton also sought to rewrite National Park Service management policies, reversing the 90-year mission of the Park Service to maintain the parks "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations," with little input by Congress, the public or national parks superintendents.

Norton's one positive legacy is completing a historic water use agreement among the seven Colorado River basin states, resolving tangled issues that dated to 1931. Her predecessor, Bruce Babbitt, initiated the nonpartisan agreement. Norton stayed the course. That truly collaborative effort is a notable exception in her tenure.

Dirk Kempthorne, two-term governor of Idaho and a former U.S. senator, promises more of the same. President Bush said, "Dirk understands that those who live closest to the land know how to manage it best, and he will work closely with state and local leaders to ensure wise stewardship of our resources." The idea that the national interest should prevail is not destined to be a public lands legacy of the Bush administration.